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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT2602, LEBANON: SAAD HARIRI WANTS LAHOUD OUT

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT2602	2006-08-12 13:38	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL//NOFORN	Embassy Beirut

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 002602

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/12/2026

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SAAD HARIRI WANTS LAHOUD OUT

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4(d).

SUMMARY

1. (C/NF) In a meeting with Ambassador Feltman and poloff (notetaker) on August 12 at his Qoreitem mansion, Future Movement leader Saad Hariri spoke about his key objectives in the aftermath of a ceasefire between Israel and Hizballah. Convinced at the time of the meeting that the Lebanese Cabinet will unanimously accept UNSCR 1701 during its session at 1700 local time on August 12, Hariri warned that the international community must continue to keep Syria and Iran off balance. In conjunction with this, he intends to push anew for the ouster of President Emile Lahoud and senior Lebanese army officials, including LAF chief Michel Sleiman. He predicts that Hizballah will be militarily and politically weakened by this conflict, and that Nabih Berri will capitalize on this in reasserting his Amal party as the preeminent Shi'ite grouping in Lebanon. The reconstruction effort will be a key factor in deciding whether the central government, with international backing, will be able to strengthen its influence in the South or whether the vacuum will be filled once again by Iranian money channelled through Hizballah, not the government. Asked about putting a mechanism in place to control arms smuggling, Saad appeared uninformed and unconcerned by the specifics and suggested that everything comes down to keeping the Syrians and Iranians otherwise occupied. End Summary.

EXPECTS RESOLUTION WILL BE APPROVED

2. (C) When asked whether the Cabinet will approve UNSCR 1701 during this afternoon's session, Saad said confidently that, "it will go through." During a side conversation with Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi before the Hariri meeting, Aridi told the Ambassador that there will be "no problem" in gaining unanimous Cabinet approval of the resolution, adding that Nabih Berri has played a particularly important role in gaining Hizballah acquiescence. (Note. This was before Iranian FM Mottaki's speech in Yemen calling the resolution unacceptable. Also, the ongoing Israeli military actions -- that intensified today rather than lessened, as most Lebanese expected -- have provoked some Lebanese into calling the resolution clearly one-sided. End Note.)

POST CEASEFIRE

3. (C) Looking ahead to the period following the hoped-for LAF/UNIFIL-plus deployment and Israeli/Hizballah withdrawal, Hariri hopes to weaken Syrian and Iranian influence in Lebanon while strenghtening the central government as much as possible. He believes that Hizballah, though it will claim victory, has in fact "been hurt big time" and will emerge from this conflict significantly weaker both militarily and politically. According to Hariri, "Nabih Berri is furious with Hizballah." While Berri will maintain a united Shi'a front for some months following the conflict, Berri will put pressure on Hizballah to keep in line and, ultimately, "Berri's dream is to finish off Hizballah" and reclaim Amal's primacy among the Shi'a. Hariri said that Berri had compelled Hizballah to accept the LAF deployment plan, and that this spells "the beginning of the end" for HIZballah. "If we play our cards right," Hariri added.

4. (C/NF) Hariri stressed that Berri should be strengthened by ensuring a successful LAF deployment to the South and by channelling international assistance for reconstruction through mechanisms in which Berri has a role. Mentioning

specifically Japan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, Hariri asked that the USG help "entice people" to donate funds and military equipment to the government. He said he had spoken to Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohamed Bin Zayed, who is "willing to come in big time." He also suggested setting up a Lebanon donors' conference along the lines of last year's "Beirut One" conference. Hariri added that if Iran wishes to contribute, it can do so through the central government and not simply through Hizballah as it has

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done in the past. (Note. Ghazi Aridi, with whom the Ambassador spoke briefly while at Hariri's house, also mentioned establishing an "Arab and International Fund for Lebanon," managed by the GOL and specifically Berri, to which countries could donate. "Iran couldn't refuse to put money in this fund." End note.) The Ambassador raised with Hariri the concern that the Berri family, and Berri's wife Randa in particular, should not be able to benefit financially, as they have with previous development funding for the south.

15. (C) On support for the LAF deployment, Hariri said that the French are preparing to take the lead and will send a contingent for UNIFIL-plus and have reached out to the Turks, Malaysians, and Spanish. Cryptically, Hariri added that "we need the Russians too." When queried as to why a Russian contingent to UNIFIL-plus is so critical, Hariri waved the matter off.

16. (C/NF) Asking that his comments be kept close-hold, Hariri whispered that, "We need to remove Lahoud, (LAF commander Michel) Sleiman, and (Head of the G2 army intelligence) George Khoury. They are in bed with Syria. They are in bed with Hizballah." While Hariri hopes to eventually recruit Nabih Berri's critical support to achieve this, he asked that international pressure on Iran and Syria continue unabated. "We need to keep Iran and Syria busy with themselves." On Iran, he urged that we secure a tough new Security Council resolution on the nuclear program in early September. On Syria, he pressed for the quick establishment of an international tribunal to try those suspected in his father's assassination. He said that if the Security Council were to pass the resolution on the tribunal now, the Cabinet would be able to accept it and forward it for parliamentary approval. Hariri wants to "have a sword on Iran's neck and on Syria's neck" in order to weaken their Lebanese proxies.

COMMENT

17. (C/NF) While focusing on the long term, Hariri brushed off some key concerns. Asked about controlling arms smuggling, he professed surprise that Beirut International Airport might still be used for such a nefarious purpose and thought that Hizballah no longer controlled the airport. Regarding his plan for a Berri-led development effort, Hariri minimized concerns about the Speaker's history of siphoning off funds from his post-civil war Council for the South, saying that it had only been "10 to 15 per cent" and that, despite this, Berri "succeeded" in building up the South.

18. (C/NF) Hariri desperately wants to be rid of Lahoud and Sleiman in particular, and is relying on international pressure on their patrons Syria and Iran. However, Hariri said he has no idea of who should replace Lahoud and Sleiman. Acknowledging that the Sunna and Shi'a can not simply choose the replacements without consulting the Maronites, from whose ranks the President and LAF chief should come, Hariri suggested that "our Maronite friends" do not yet have their house sufficiently in order to agree on successors to the posts.

19. (C/NF) On a positive note, Hariri praised with seeming sincerity the performance of PM Fouad Siniora during this crisis. "If I had picked Bahije (Tabbarah, former Minister of Justice) a year ago," he said, his voice trailing off as he shook his head. We think that this was a tacit

acknowledgement, Saad-style, that the strong advice we and the French gave him to pick Siniora over his initial choice of Tabbarah was the right one. But what was encouraging in Saad's praise for Siniora was the suggestion that the two of them will now be able to cooperate without the internal rivalries and jealousies that had plagued their relationship earlier this year. In general, we think Siniora has done a better job when he hasn't had to worry about the less experienced but politically more powerful Saad second-guessing him. But we also believe that it's good Saad is home: the image of Saad Hariri staying at the Plaza Athenee in Paris and globe-trotting with an sizable entourage, while hundreds of thousands of Lebanese felt forced to leave their homes, was not good for the future of the March 14 movement.

FELTMAN